

Zeppelin Vies for Rock Legacy

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BLUES-ROCK LINK - Robert Plant and guitarist Jimmy Page steam along in an acoustic set at Forum. Times photo by Marianna Diamos

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When the Who's Keith Moon turned Led Zeppelin drummer John Bonham's obligatory solo into a twosome Thursday night at the Inglewood Forum, it offered a convenient opportunity to reflect on the pecking order of the classic English bands from the '60s.

Rivaled only by the Rolling Stones as the world's most popular rock group, Zeppelin has long been downgraded by critics for a musical stance that is both borrowed (from Cream, the Yardbirds, Jimi Hendrix) and narrow.

Bands like the Stones, the Who and the Kinks—among the survivors—have been cited, justifiably, for a more compelling point of view and greater sociological impact.

Indeed, it was hard not to shudder Thursday when guitarist Jimmy Page drew a vigorous response from the predominantly teen-age audience with a psychedelic-tinted treatment of the "Star Spangled Banner" that was blueprinted eight years ago in the same arena by Hendrix.

Despite such blatancy, the lesson of this week's Forum concerts is that the gap between Zeppelin and the remaining '60s groups has closed.

Zeppelin is still weak in matters of substance, but it provides perhaps the purest glimpse of the intense, blues-rock/power tradition of any of the veteran outfits.

Peter Grant, Zeppelin's manager, has always insisted the secret of the band's success is that it *delivers* in concert. When the foursome tore into "Trampled Underfoot," "Achilles' Last Stand" and "Whole Lotta Love" Thursday, it unleashed a torrent of high-energy assault that is rarely experienced in an age that prizes smooth, easy-listening pop.

The Who's music, for instance, may be more endearing and ultimately more enduring, but that group's stage shows no longer have the conviction and dynamics of its peak period. While the dropoff hasn't been as severe, the Stones, too, have lost much of the sensual urgency of the landmark '69 tour.

Thus, Zeppelin is the best chance teen-age rock fans have to see a formidable blues-rock band at—or near—its prime. Among newer forces, Bruce Springsteen has more consistent energy and far more emotional challenge in his concerts, but he operates from a singer-songwriter stance.

Pop historians will no doubt treat the Stones and the Who far kinder, but, for the kid with \$9.75 in his pocket and interested only in an evening's entertainment, Zeppelin is neck-and-neck with the Stones as the best taste of the classic English rock legacy.

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Because the first two numbers in the Forum show—"The Song Remains the Same" and "Sick Again"—both mention California or Los Angeles, it's tempting to think their use was part of a cagey, topical strategy. But the

Forum set followed basically the same pattern the band has used since its tour began April 1 in Dallas.

The only changes have involved the substitution of "Over the Hills and Far Away" for "In My Time of Dying" and the addition of "Heartbreaker" (Tuesday night) or "Trampled Underfoot" (Thursday). Both moves helped.

"Over the Hills . . ." is one of Zeppelin's most inviting tunes, a mixture of hard and soft elements that is a perfect vehicle for Robert Plant's voice. The sizzling version of "Trampled," boosted by John Paul Jones' sturdy keyboard work, was one of Thursday's high points.

As with most tours, certain songs tend to play a key, symbolic role. Where the brute power of "Whole Lotta Love" and the bravado of "Lemon Song" underscored the tenacious, macho stance of the band's early days, the more melodic, multilayered "Stairway to Heaven" eventually became its cornerstone.

This time, "Achilles Last Stand," the standout track from last year's "Presence" album, is the most commanding moment. The song is an urgent, uncompromising self-affirmation recorded in the months after Plant's near-fatal auto accident, when the band's future was in serious doubt.

Page's guitar work, always the band's hallmark, is at its most stirring and controlled on the tune, and Plant's singing has a gripping, primal-scream quality. The message is immediate and convincing: Zeppelin is still a vital, confident force.

Given the song's impact, it's surprising Zeppelin uses only one other number ("Nobody's Fault but Mine") from "Presence" in the set. Considering its overblown, 3½-hour length, there is ample room to trim some fat in favor of such catchy, compact tunes as "For Your Life," "Candy Store Rock" and "Royal Orleans."

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The revision could start with the solos. I wonder if Page, Bonham and Jones realize how crowded the snack bars and rest rooms get every time they start into one of their solo jaunts. Vocalist Plant tries to keep his body moving during these periods to show he is enthralled by the music, but he looks as bored as everyone else.

Not everyone agrees Zeppelin's solos are either indulgent or ill-advised. Rather than take a couple of intermissions during the long set, one fan argued Thursday, the solos enable Page, Bonham and Jones wider self-expression. Besides, he continued, the solos appeal to the band's true fans as opposed to the AM—"Stairway to Heaven" crowd.

Maybe so, but they are mostly predictable, uneventful exercises. Jones' 30-minute keyboard workout on "No Quarter"—far more vigorous Thursday than opening night

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LED ZEPPELIN

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—at least has some subtlety. Bonham's drumming, extremely effective as punctuation for Page's guitar, ends up simply undistinguished when offered alone. But the biggest disappointment continues to be Page's bag of electronic clichés during "Dazed and Confused."

It's a lapse of creative imagination that is matched only by a use of smoke and lasers that is so uninspired that the commonplace theatrical effects tend to undercut the band's authority rather than add to its visual lure.

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With the ample target it leaves for detractors, it's easy to overlook Zeppelin's strengths. But they are showcased conveniently in opening and closing segments. Despite frequent rumors about poor health and personal problems, the band is working as well as a unit as I've ever seen it. Page's guitar work bristled with excitement and drive in the opening 45 minutes as he led the group through the bravado of "The Song Remains the Same" to the snarl of "Sick Again" to the blues-based howl of "Nobody's Fault . . ." to the high-energy splendor of "Over the Hills" to the plaintive moan of "Since I've Been Loving You."

It was a tour de force that showed why Zeppelin has emerged as rock's biggest draw. The same dynamism was revived at the end when the band again ended with a "Whole Lotta Love"/"Rock and Roll" encore.

When a band has two of the crispest, most celebrative rock tunes ever written at its disposal, it makes you wonder why they cram them into a 6-minute encore and then spend a half an hour on something like "No Quarter." But Zeppelin's gluttonous approach works. It just goes to show the dangers of a monopoly. The band's sold-out engagement continues through Monday.

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KISS COMING: Speaking of powerhouse rock draws,

Kiss will be at the Forum Aug. 26, 27 and 28 and at the San Diego Sports Arena Aug. 19. Tickets for the shows go on sale at the respective box offices and various outlets Monday. The colorful group's new "Love Gun" album—featuring a remake of Phil Spector's "Then She Kissed Me"—has just been released. If "Kissed Me" is released as a single, it could be the second Spector remake to make the Top 10 this year. Shaun Cassidy's "Da Doo Ron Ron" was the first.

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LIVE ACTION: Tickets, surprisingly, were still available Friday for both Crosby, Stills & Nash's Tuesday and Wednesday concerts and for Peter Frampton's July 6 show at Anaheim Stadium . . . Ted Nugent and Lynyrd Skynyrd will be at Anaheim Stadium Aug. 27. Tickets are available by mail order only . . . Bob Marley and the Wailers will be at the Starlight Amphitheater . . . Leo Sayer and Boz Scaggs have joined Carole King on the list of Greek Theater sell outs . . . Kris Kristofferson is sold out at the Universal Amphitheater . . . Keith Jarrett will have a rare solo recital July 10 at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion .